How Narasimhan, A Saurashtrian Boy, Joined A Theatre Gr
Weaver And Ended Up Becoming Bharati, Among The More

The man who played Krishna to MGR's Arjuna

Vamanan

ROUTE TO FAME

- Born to **Venkatachalapathi and Bagyalakshmi on March 24, 1923 in Madurai,** in a family of silk weavers
- Because of a lack of interest in studies after Class IV, he **joined Valliyankundram Jamindar's boys' company at the age of 11**
- **Specialised in playing female roles in stage musicals** and wowed Malaysia with his guile
- Came to Madras at the age of 15 and was **introduced to cinema by Y V Rao in Bhaktha Meera (1938)**
- **Introduced to Jupiter Somu by writer Elangovan, impressed the producer by acting out scenes from Jupiter's hit Kannagi (1942)** and began celluloid career in earnest in the mid-1940s
- **Married in 1950,** had three sons and three daughters
- **Conferred Kalaimamani in 1977 by the Tamil Nadu government,** a year before his death at the age of 55

TAKING THE LEAD: Narasimha Bharati with Madhuri Devi in Ponmudi

A hundred years ago, a Saurasthrian boy named Narasimhan was born in Madurai and grew up to the 'rap trap rap' of the weaver's loom that the city was famous for. Narasimhan sought to escape from the monotonous sounds of the handloom that his father Venkatachalapathi plied, as well as the poverty that it entailed. When the opportunity presented itself in the shape of 'Sugunodaya Sabha', a theatre group run by some Saurashtrians, the boy of nine convinced his father to let him join the troupe.

The decision proved right, for Narasimhan, who gained the title 'Bharati', went on to become a lead actor of Tamil cinema, with one of his masterpieces being Ellis R Dungun's penultimate movie as a film director, Modern Theatres 'Ponmudi' (1950). The film was noted for its cinematic values: screened a few years later at the University of California, it won a certificate of appreciation for its cinematographer J G Vijayan.

Narasimhan's decision to become a boy actor in the early 1930s could not have been at a more congenial time. Drama troupes of smart, musically talented boys were in vogue throughout the Tamil-speaking world. At the age of 11, Narasimhan caught the eye of the zamindar of Valliyankundram, a village near Madurai, and was signed up for three years for the latter's boys' company. Narasimhan gained the title 'Bharati' for playing the role of Saraswathi, the Hindu deity of learning, who is also called Bharati.

Bharati became a boy actor in female roles and is said to have excelled in Egyptian and gypsy dances as well. Narasimha Bharati's gumption and enterprise can be seen from the fact that even as a boy he had found another avenue of earning: he was a commentator for silent [illegible] that had come up near the naubatkhana (music room) of the Thirumalai Nayak Mahal in Madurai. The explanations he gave for the action seen on screen made the silent films more accessible and more interesting to common viewers. Greater luck came his way when he was enlisted for a trip to Malaysia by the 'Puliamanagar Original Boys Company'.

Narasimha Bharati was the proud and petulant Bama in the company's Bama Vijayam which had a 100-show run in Malaysia. He played the teenaged Krishna as well as the adult Krishna's amiable wife Rukmini in 'Krishna Leela', staged on a ship for upper class passengers. The veteran film maker Y V Rao is said to have been so impressed that he enlisted him for his 'Bhakta Meera' (1938). The Second World War broke out when the troupe was performing in Penang, upon which it returned to Madras after facing many hitches and finally wound up.

Narasimha Bharati came into film opportunities in Coimbatore in the mid-1940s. After an opening in Jupiter Pictures 'Sri Murugan' (1946), he was the hero in its 'Kanjan' (Miser), written and directed by the stormy petrel of the freedom struggle, Kovai Ayyamuthu. He began to be typecast in mythological roles, as Rama and Mahavishnu in Jupiter's 'Valmiki' (1946), Narada in Pakshiraja's 'Kannika' (1947) and as Krishna in Sunderrao Nadkarni's 'Krishna Vijayam' (1950).

In 'Abhimanyu' (1948), late chief minister M Karunanidhi's uncredited debut film as dialogue writer, Narasimha Bharati was Krishna to matinee idol M G Ramachandran's Arjuna.

Narasimha Bharati reached a certain apogee of his career when Dungan chose him for the lead role in 'Ponmudi'. More than four decades later, Dungan

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sserted that Narasimha Bharati and Madhuri Devi had beautifully pulled off he scenes of youthful intimacy he had isualised for the film. One of the highghts of 'Ponmudi' was the romantic each scene that Dungan set up at the Modern Theatres Studios in Salem.

In 'En Thangai' (1952), featuring MGR a tragic role, Narasimha Bharati got he opportunity to reprise his romance ith Madhuri Devi at the Karl Schmidt emorial on Elliot's Beach to the strains a bewitching melody ('Aadum oonjalai alay', meaning 'the waves dance like rocking swing').

He played a leading role in Modern heatres 'Digambara Samiyar', and was the heroic foil in 'Thirumbi Paar' which had Sivaji essaying the role of an anti-hero with panache. Sadly for Bharati, this post-Parasakthi film with Karunanidhi's vitriolic dialogues and Sivaji's brand of cynical villainy bombed at the box office. Interesting films in Narasimha Bharati's career tally of about 40 films, were Madanamohini (1953), which echoed the Dravidian attack on Pillaiyar and sought to resolve it through devotion, and Sampoorna Ramayanam, in which he played Lakshmana to NTR's Rama.

SPOTLIGHT: Narasimha Bharati with Premavati in Krishna Vijayam

By the end of the 1950s, when MGR, Sivaji and Gemini Ganesan had established themselves, Narasimha Bharati, despite his versatile acting talent, was edged out. He tried to produce a film in the Sourashtra language on the 19th century saint-minstrel, Natanagopalanayaki Swamigal, but failed to complete it. He played Rama multiple times in richly mounted Ramayana stage musicals produced by veteran music director Govindarajulu Naidu. Narasimha Bharati also ran a dramatic troupe and staged some social plays. He died in 1978 after a relapse of the stomach ulcers that had begun to trouble him from the late forties because of irregular eating habits.

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